THE EASTERN ROBIN

by

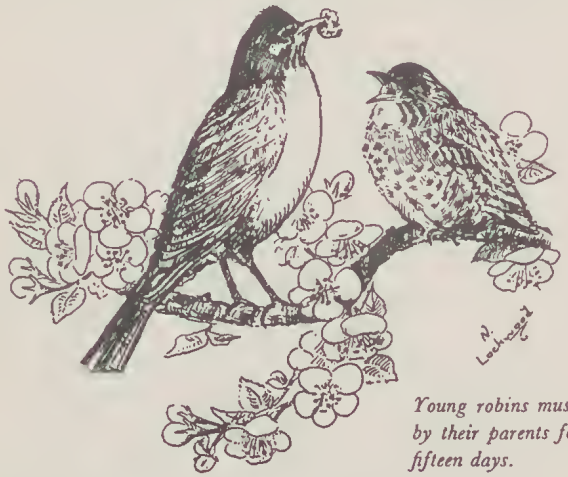
MARIE B. PABST
Raymond Foundation

CHICAGO NATURAL HISTORY MUSEUM
RESEARCH EDUCATION
FOUNDED 1893 BY MARSHALL FIELD

MARCH 2, 1946 LOOSELEAF No. 122

The Eastern Robin

Each spring people await the arrival of "the first robin." Chicagoans may rightly feel they know this bird well for it sets up housekeeping in the shade trees that line the streets and grow in the parks. However, the first robin of the spring, whose arrival is regularly



Young robins must be fed by their parents for about fifteen days.

recorded on the front page of the city newspaper, is somewhat of a fraud, for it has probably been wintering nearby in one of the forest preserves or suburban orchards, and is moving into the city prior to a take-off for its summer home farther to the north.

If one searches diligently robins may be seen every month of the year, although the smallest number are found in December and January. By the first of March the number has increased, for not only are winter residents present but early spring migrants from farther south have added their presence. Most of these robins nest farther north. By the first of April the robins which are Chicago summer residents have taken over the lawns and parks and begun looking over the housing situation. The location of the nest is not a difficult problem. Usually a tree suffices, but robins have been known to build in all sorts of odd places.

A robin's food is 42 per cent animal, principally insects, and 58 per cent vegetable, chiefly *wild* fruit. The robin on the lawn hunting for worms is also seeking the grass-destroying grubs of the May beetle. It is not known whether the robin hears the grub and earthworm or sees a movement of the leaves, but when the robin's bill goes down into the lawn it usually comes up with a catch of grub or worm as the case may be.

Parent robins are generally regarded as perfect parents. Usually the female builds the nest without much aid and incubates the eggs for about two weeks but as soon as the young are hatched the male gives its full share of assistance. It brings food and helps clean the nest. Young birds of the earlier broods and males spend the night at community roosts, which increase in population until migration begins in September.

In the south, robins have no particular home. They gather in enormous flocks wherever food is plentiful. At one time robins were killed at the southern roosting places and sold for food in the markets of southern cities. In fact they were classified as game birds in several southern states until the Federal Migratory Bird Law of 1914 forbade the killing of migratory song birds.

The early settlers of our country saw a bird that reminded them of the English robin redbreast. This new acquaintance they named after the little English bird and so the larger migratory thrush of the new world was named after a warbler from the old world half its size.

Our robins are the largest of the thrush family, a group renowned for their sweet songs. The American robin is particularly famous for the habit of singing in the rain and at evening time.

Our Eastern robin is one of five varieties of the "migratory thrush"; four of these thrushes live in the United States and one is Mexican.

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THE HERRING GULL

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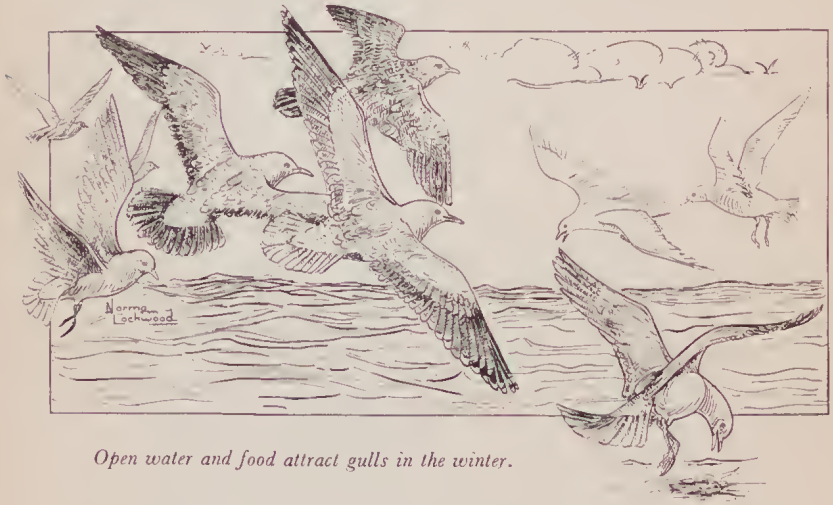
MARCH 9, 1946 LOOSELEAF No. 123

The Herring Gull

With the coming of the white man to the western world many native birds have decreased in number and some have become extinct; but others, like the gulls, have adapted themselves to man's habits and seem to



Open water and food attract gulls in the winter.

be increasing in number. Familiar in the Chicago area are two large species: the herring gull and the ring-billed gull. As scavengers these birds have become an asset, and here in Chicago we find them not only along the lake front and on the park lagoons but in west Chicago along the drainage canal, the dumps and the refuse heaps.

Gulls eat fish, shell-fish such as clams, and anything else that floats their way. Formerly they caught the fish in the lakes or ate the food washed to shore by the waves, but today large flocks follow transoceanic ships far out to sea, and fishing schooners are circled by hungry gulls. Their services as sanitation squads are of great value. They gather in harbors where fish are being dressed and devour the portions cast off by the fishermen. They gather where garbage is dumped and clean the water of floating refuse.

Gulls are masters of the air. They often flap along on an easy course, but when high winds circulate through the upper layers of air they can be seen wheeling and circling with ease, in complete control of speed and direction. Although these birds are also adept swimmers they prefer fishing from the surface rather than diving.

In spring as soon as the ice has melted, the gulls return to their birthplace and raise their young on some gravel-strewn beach of an isolated northern lake. Certain islands are renowned for their populous summer communities of gulls. Often the islands are covered with such hosts of birds that one might wonder how the individual bird can locate its own nest. The nests are close together, but each pair of birds has its own premises of about 100 to 300 square yards and no bird ever fails to find its own home. The entire gull community is laid out in private lots and each family keeps within its own territory. After the young have been hatched they do not wander from home, for no older bird will allow trespassing, and any young one who has strayed from its home grounds will be promptly attacked and quite probably killed before it can find shelter. It seldom happens that both parents are absent from home at the same time, so the young birds are being continually corralled and guarded.

Usually the nest is placed on the ground and is built of coarse grass, roots, sticks or moss. It contains two or three eggs. Both parent birds incubate the eggs and care for the young. By the last of July the older chicks are having their first swim and early in September the birds begin to fly south, so that by mid-October the whole colony has disappeared.

Herring gulls do not don the beautiful silvery gray attire of the adult until they are about four years old. The first three years the plumage is a dark brownish slate color.

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THE CHIMNEY SWIFT

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The Chimney Swift

Whirling flocks of chimney swifts above the housetop form a familiar sight throughout eastern North America.

The chimney swift rarely if ever comes to rest on the ground. Most of its waking hours are spent on the wing "sweeping" the air clear of insects. On late summer evenings flocks of swifts sail and circle in huge wheeling groups, possibly giving the young birds training or

The swift's nest is built of sticks fastened to the side of a chimney. The twigs are gathered in the treetops and the nest is glued together with the bird's saliva.

exercise in preparation for the long flight to their winter home. At the end of one of these spectacular flights the entire group usually funnels into a chimney for the night. The rapidity and accuracy with which the birds disappear into the cavity are amazing. It has been estimated that they enter their roost at a rate of fifteen per second.

Swifts build their nests of bits or twigs glued to the side of the chimney. The twigs are gathered while the bird is flying through the treetops. Most bird students agree that the swift grasps the tips of dead branches in its feet and breaks off a small piece. The twigs are glued together with the bird's saliva. The saliva hardens and fixes the twigs together securely.

Both parents incubate the eggs. The young are nearly naked and are blind when hatched, but very soon the spines on the end of the tail appear and the young swift is able to leave the nest and crawl about hanging on to the rough surface of the chimney and propping itself up by the tail.

Chimney swifts originally built their nests in hollow trees. The incoming settlers cut down the trees, but the swifts adapted themselves to man's ways and utilized the ever-increasing number of chimneys, although nests have also been found in barns and attics and on the sides of wells and cisterns.

For years bird students have wondered about the winter home of the chimney swift. This common summer resident of the United States leaves the country every fall late in September and returns the middle of April. Its whereabouts during its absence has long been a mystery. Bird banders—bird students who attach small metal bands to the legs of captured birds with the hope that someone may return the band, if the bird is captured again or found dead—have especially hoped for information as to the migration routes and the winter home of the swift.

Not until August, 1944, did we obtain a clue to the winter home of the swift. At that time a Tennessee bird student received from the Fish and Wildlife Service of the United States the returns on some of his banded birds. Five of his swifts had been captured in Peru. Thirteen birds from the United States had been taken 3,000 miles away, south of the equator. One of the birds had been banded in 1937 and had probably made seven round trips between Peru and Tennessee. Competent ornithologists had predicted that the swifts would be found wintering in the Amazon region, and these birds were recovered near the headwaters of that river.

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THE EUROPEAN STARLING

by

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MARCH 23, 1946

LOOSELEAF No. 125

The European Starling

A bird that has beeome a nuisanee, partieularly in our large eastern cities, is the European starling. These birds have beeome numerous in winter, and their roosts about large buildings and along the eity streets are so

In April and May nine-tenths of the starling's diet is insects.

filthy that people ean only denounce the bird and the misguided persons who introdueed it to Ameriea.

There is no reason to doubt that some day the starling will beeome eommon throughout most of agrieultural United States. It was introdueed in 1890 in Central Park, New York City. For several years it was found only in that vieinity, but about 1910 it began to nest farther and farther away. By 1929 it had reaehed Chieago, and by 1940 it was found as far west as Utah. Perhaps by now it has reaehed the Paeifie coast.

Whether a bird is to be elassified as benefieial or harmful is determined largely by its food habits. Detailed studies of the European starling by the Biologieal Survey of the United States Department of Agrieulture, and by a Canadian survey, give evidence that from the farmer's

point of view the insect diet of this bird makes it more desirable than the robin or the catbird. It feeds on some of the worst pests of garden and field.

More than half of an adult starling's food is animal matter. In considering the value of a bird it is very important to know what the nestlings eat, for they outnumber the adult birds and during the first few days of their life they eat their own weight in food. Then too, nestlings are present in the season when injurious insects are most abundant and when crops can be most benefited by the destruction of insects.

One person figured out that a brood of five young starlings was fed 118 times in one day. Each time the parent birds brought in a feeding it consisted of three or four cutworms, earthworms or grasshoppers, or an equal amount of miscellaneous small insects such as weevils. As the birds grow older their taste for May beetles and ground beetles develops. Among the birds of northeastern United States valued as insect destroyers only the bluebird and purple martin surpass the starling in the number of insects destroyed during the breeding season. As the birds become old enough to leave the nest they add to their diet vegetable matter, especially fruit. Whole flocks, particularly young birds, will descend on a cherry tree and strip it clean, and these raids have made them thoroughly hated by cherry growers. An occasional shooting during the few days preceding the ripening of a crop will ward off most of the starlings.

The adult starling is quite a handsome bird. It has a dark, iridescent coat. During the spring and summer the bill is bright yellow. After the breeding season the feathers have white tips and the bill darkens. The bird wears this mottled outfit during the winter but the whitened feather tips wear off and by early spring the bird is dark.

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THE EASTERN NIGHTHAWK

by

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CHICAGO NATURAL HISTORY MUSEUM
RESEARCH EDUCATION
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LOOSELEAF No. 126

The Eastern Nighthawk

The nighthawk has been known by many names. In the south it has been called a bull bat because its habit of flying at dusk is combined with its diving toward the earth from great heights; as it dives it makes a sound like a "bull roarer." Early American settlers called it the goatsucker because of its resemblance to an English bird of that name. The name "goatsucker" arose from the superstition that these birds milked goats—a story that probably arose from the birds' habit of flying around animals to catch flies and other insects. The name "goatsucker" is often applied to the family of which the nighthawk is a member. All of this family have soft plumage and fly noiselessly at dusk or at night. The coloration renders them difficult to distinguish when at rest. None of the goatsuckers build nests and their eggs are colored so as to be indistinguishable from the ground.

Nighthawks are one of the last of the migrating birds to return to the Chicago region in spring. They winter in Central and South America, sometimes going as far south as Patagonia. Each spring they find their way back over thousands of miles; a bird will return not

only to the same state in which it was raised but to the same city and even to the same rooftop.

Nighthawks choose solitary open sites and rarely nest close to each other. Rock ledges, gravel beaches, burnt-over areas and barren patches in open woods or fields were once the common location of the nests but in recent years nighthawks have found a better location. On the tops of tall buildings with flat gravel roofs, where it is safe from predatory animals, the nighthawk now prefers to raise its young. Even in rural areas it usually chooses a rooftop for its nest.

There are commonly two eggs in each clutch. The female incubates the eggs and broods the young until they are able to fly. Not only must the eggs be protected from the cold but from the intense heat and the glaring sun that beats relentlessly down on unprotected nesting sites. Sometimes the temperature will rise to 130 degrees on the unshaded bird and she will sit with her beak open panting for air; but still she remains over the eggs, to shade them. Sometimes they become stuck in the melting tar and are baked. The young when hatched are covered with soft down and look somewhat like tiny chicks. They are soon able to run about but will "freeze" when strangers are near. Then they take short flights from their own rooftop and as they grow older they make longer and longer excursions until it is time for the fall migration.

In the autumn the birds gather in huge flocks and leisurely make their way southward. The whirling masses of birds flying over the lakes and fields are a notable sight.

The birds are expert flyers and sweep the air clean of insects in their vicinity. Their large mouths act as insect nets. Usually gnats, flying ants and beetles comprise most of the food, although in farm regions the birds consume numbers of grasshoppers. They also eat mosquitoes, and thus especially deserve our protection.

This page is for your own notes and illustrations

THE SLATE-COLORED JUNCO

by

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Museum Stories, Series XLVI, No. 6

APRIL 6, 1946 LOOSELEAF No. 127

The Slate-Colored Junco

Chicago birds are divided into four groups: the permanent residents, the transients, the summer residents, and the winter residents. The cardinal, which can be seen any month, is a permanent resident. Some birds can be seen only as they pass through this region

Juncos spend the winter in the Chicago area but nest in the north.

in the spring or fall; these are the transients, and the golden plover is an example. The summer residents nest in this region but migrate southward in the autumn; the chimney swift belongs to this group. The slate-colored junco or snowbird is a winter resident for it nests to the north and winters in southern Canada and the United States.

Almost any winter day, flocks of juncos can be seen flitting about through low bushes or hopping over the ground. As they fly, the white outer tail feathers flash conspicuously. Their color has been described as like a winter day: "leaden skies above, snow below." The head, chest, and back are an even slaty-gray and the color below is a sharply contrasting white.

The birds spend the winter in weed-filled pastures and along the brush-grown roadsides. They have heavy short bills which are well adapted to cracking the hard coats of weed seeds. The junco's diet is 78 per cent vegetable matter: seeds of grasses, sedges, rushes, rag-

weed, lamb's quarters, Russian thistle and wild sunflower. Because it eats so much weed seed, the junco is ranked as one of the most useful of our native birds. The 22 per cent animal food is composed of weevils, moths, caterpillars, grasshoppers, and other noxious insects. During the summer, nearly half the junco's food is insect material; during the winter, the food is composed almost entirely of seeds. Juncos are frequent visitors to feeding stations but they seem to prefer food found on or near the ground.

With the coming of spring the juncos flock together and move northward in large groups. They are joined by bands of juncos that have wintered farther south. The weed-filled ditches and the garden patches are filled with hordes of homeward-bound travelers.

The junco is a characteristic summer resident of the mountains of western Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Vermont and the forests of northern Minnesota, Canada, and Alaska. In the winter the junco is generally sociable, but when nesting, it becomes retiring and prefers solitary places. In the White Mountains of New Hampshire it nests above the tree line. Nests are built on the ground among the fallen pine needles or hidden among the rushes and the sphagnum moss of spruce and cedar swamps. There are from three to five specked whitish eggs that are incubated for eleven or twelve days.

The name "junco" is derived from the Latin word for "rush" and seems appropriate, for this little bird is frequently found among these plants.

This page is for your own notes and illustrations

THE ENGLISH SPARROW

by

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APRIL 13, 1946

LOOSELEAF No. 128

The English Sparrow

This undesirable immigrant, for whom no one has a good word, was introduced into North America by European settlers who wanted familiar birds about them. They believed the English sparrow would help in the destruction of the gypsy moth, which had been intro-

City children can learn much about bird life by watching the sparrows.

duced from Europe and had become a destructive pest. But the bird has proved to be far more of a nuisance than the insect pest for it eats comparatively few insects, and many of those consumed are beneficial varieties. Occasionally, when swarms of caterpillars have attacked foliage, the English sparrows have destroyed large numbers of the insects but seemingly only because they are so abundant and easily obtained.

Another serious criticism of the English sparrow is that it usurps food and nesting sites from native birds. About seventy of our birds are molested by the intruder. Bluebirds, house wrens, and purple martins have found

their nesting boxes appropriated; even robins have been molested. In fact, the belligerent habits of the English sparrow have resulted in the disappearance of desirable birds in some areas.

The sparrows are communal in their housing arrangements. Numbers of them will use the same rafter, or the same hole they have torn in the roof. The surroundings become littered with dirt and droppings.

The English sparrow is not closely related to our native sparrows, which are meritorious citizens. It is a member of the weaver finch family, most of whose members are native to Africa. It has been called "English" because most of the birds introduced in other countries originated in England, in spite of the fact the bird is equally native to central Europe. The ancestral home of the weaver finches is Africa, and this hardy species seems to have spread to Asia and northern Europe a long time ago. So the English sparrow is neither English nor a sparrow. Some people believe we should rename it more accurately and call it the "house sparrow" or even the "weaver finch."

Other countries which have suffered from its introduction are Canada, Mexico, the temperate regions of South America, New Zealand, South Africa, Hawaii, and the Philippine Islands.

This bird seems to have had the ability to adapt itself wherever it has been introduced. No other bird associates so closely with man and is so dependent on man's activities for food. Like other weaver finches, it is rarely found far from men's homes.

Those city children who have few opportunities to study other birds can, by observing the English sparrow, learn much about bird life. Easily watched as it comes to the window ledge and builds under the eaves of the house, it exhibits many of the peculiar habits and problems common to birds.

This page is for your own notes and illustrations

THE BRONZED GRACKLE OR CROW BLACKBIRD

by

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Raymond Foundation

Museum Stories, Series XLVI, No. 8

APRIL 20, 1946 LOOSELEAF No. 129

The Bronzed Grackle or Crow Blackbird

In the summertime the bronzed grackle, a large, iridescent bird, can often be seen strutting about on the grass or wading along the edges of streams or lakes.

The bronzed grackle is common throughout the farmlands of eastern United States.

Under normal conditions this bird would be found in the forests near ponds or marshes, but man has provided such a bountiful supply of food for the "crow blackbirds" that they are now common throughout the farmlands of eastern United States.

There are three varieties of grackle in the United States: the purple grackle is found in the Middle Atlantic Coast region, west to the Alleghenies; the Florida grackle occurs along the South Atlantic and the Gulf Coast; while the bronzed grackle inhabits central and northeastern United States.

Bronzed grackles feed on a variety of food, animal and vegetable, depending on the season and what is available. During the warm weather, they may be seen in company with robins and flickers stalking across the lawn picking up insects, boring for grubs, hunting for

scattered seeds and berries. They wade into shallow streams after insects, small fish, and crayfish. On occasion, individuals will attempt to catch insects "on the wing."

As destroyers of insects and weed seeds these birds have good records. About one-third of their food is made up of harmful insects. They also destroy mice, frogs, snakes, small birds, and birds' eggs. Even the English sparrow is no match for the bronzed grackle, which often catches a live English sparrow and proceeds to kill and eat its victim. Unfortunately, our native song birds may also be caught, and when a pair of grackles nest in a tree, the more desirable birds will leave the neighborhood, actually fleeing for their lives.

But the habit of attacking the corn crop makes these birds a serious pest, particularly because they arrive in large flocks. They had already acquired a bad reputation with the Indians before the white man came because of their attacks on the maize patches. Early in the spring their taste for grain attracts them to the farmer's cornerib and to the barnyard. As soon as plowing begins, they follow along in the furrows picking up grubs, and at planting time the grackles, accompanied by crows and blackbirds, pull up the sprouting grain. At harvest time immense flocks will rip open the ears of corn while the kernels are soft and juicy; they often ruin an entire field in this way.

Early in July when the young are able to care for themselves, the grackles gather in flocks that contain thousands of individual birds. It is these assemblages that cause so much damage to cornfields and orchards.

The only cure seems to be to shoot the birds when they become too numerous to be beneficial. But grackles are wary and recognize a man with a gun as an enemy.

This page is for your own notes and illustrations

THE BLUE JAY

by

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CHICAGO
NATURAL HISTORY
MUSEUM
RESEARCH EDUCATION
FOUNDED
1893
BY MARSHALL FIELD

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LOOSELEAF No. 130

The Blue Jay

A blue jay streaking through the treetops is a startling sight. It is a handsome bird, and its jaunty crest and black tie easily distinguish it from any other of our Chicago birds. Its noisy screams make it conspic-

The blue jay has been called "the sentinel of the forest."

uous. Blue jays seem to enjoy congregating in the woods and "yelping" in a chorus at the tops of their voices. They delight in teasing other birds, and often a sleepy owl will fall victim to their tormenting.

The blue jay has a reputation for being particularly intelligent. It imitates other birds' calls and can sometimes be taught to talk. A jay occasionally becomes quite friendly and makes an entertaining pet; it displays such intense curiosity that it almost seems to think. The birds seem to act as sentinels for other animals of the forest, and their screaming will warn other creatures of any unusual visitor or approaching enemy.

In the Chicago region the blue jay is a permanent resident. This means that the birds that nest here in the summer remain during the winter.

The blue jay seems to prefer nesting in coniferous trees, but it often uses the city shade trees. The nest is constructed of sticks and dead twigs and is lined with rootlets, feathers, leaves, or grass. The sticks used in building the nest are firm twigs broken from the trees.

Once the nest is finished and the eggs are laid, blue jays become models of silent devotion. The usually noisy bird slips silently among the branches. But let any stranger, either feathered or human, approach too closely and caution is thrown to the winds. Jays will attack cats, squirrels, or snakes. Even people are in danger of being struck by the wings, beak, and claws of the furious parent. Whatever may be the blue jay's reputation as a thief and a braggart, there is no criticism of its behavior as a parent.

After the young are able to fly, the family continues to stay together as a unit. They occasionally feed in the farmer's cornfield, and sometimes they feed on birds' eggs and young birds.

The exaggerated stories about its consumption of smaller birds have given the blue jay a bad name. Stray cats probably kill more young birds than do blue jays, and certainly man's destruction of forests and prairie lands increases the hazards of living for many of our native birds, far more than the presence of blue jays.

Three fourths of the blue jay's food is vegetable matter: nuts, small grain, fruit, and scraps of garbage about the house. A blue jay has been seen flying away with seven hazel nuts stuffed in its mouth. The jay, unlike most other birds, stores food for winter use.

Much good is accomplished by the blue jay in the destruction of large insects such as May beetles and hairy caterpillars. Few birds beside the blue jay consume the caterpillars of the tent, gypsy, browntail and sphinx moths.

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